

Swing Away

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WARREN — It's cold. It's wet. Granted, it's just not much fun in the winter months for a golfer in this state. Not everyone can get out to their local golf dome as much as they would like to during the week, but some local teaching pros agree, there are still benefits to be gained with even just one visit per week.

"By hitting balls and just concentrating on the pure basics, they're going to get better," said PGA pro Evan "Big Cat" Williams, who teaches out of Mulligan's Golf Center, in Auburn Hills.

To go a step beyond the basics, there are a few things golfers can concentrate on during the last stages of winter to make sure their swing's in shape by the time they hit the fairways this spring.

Just ask the pros.

PGA pro Bob Menzies, who also teaches out of Mulligan's Golf Center, said he sees golfers show up all the time who pull out the driver and just start whaling away.

Menzies said it's in a golfer's nature to want to pull out the big stick right away. But, he said, before getting to the driver, it's best to start with the wedges and some nice easy swings.

"It's like you wouldn't pull the car out of the garage and just hammer the gas pedal," he said.

To achieve a smooth swing, Williams said, relaxed muscles are the way to go.

"I made a living hitting the ball really far," the two-time national Long Drive Association champion said. "My longest tee shots always felt the easiest. ... In other words, relax."

Menzies and Williams said tight muscles usually come from the grip — namely, holding the club too tight.

If "10" were the hardest a golfer could hold the club, and "one" the lightest, Menzies said a "six" would be about the right number.

Or a mental image he likes to use is to picture a golfer holding a brand-new tube of toothpaste with the cap off. You should be holding it lightly enough so that none of the paste is squeezed out.

The most common swing flaw golf pros see is the slice. A slice happens from an open clubface that comes from outside the target line, cutting across the ball (from outside-in) which then puts a sidespin on the shot that causes it to take a banana route, away from the golfer, in the air.

A drill that Menzies and Williams often employ — that all golfers can do on their own — is to put a shoebox just outside the ideal swing line, behind the ball, so that if you come over the top, the club head will hit the box before the ball.

"That conditions your swing plane to come from the inside, which is a much better way of doing it," Williams said. "Then you start to play more like a professional than a mid-handicap amateur."

Of course, to achieve any kind of easy-flowing swing, proper balance is key.

"Your goal should be, 'When I'm done swinging, am I balanced?'" Menzies said. "Just that would help so many people."

The pros said that all too often they see golfers fall back after a swing, when the reality is, a golfer should have pretty much all his weight forward on the front foot in the end.

Menzies and Williams said there is a good self check for golfers to see if they've finished in balance with their weight forward.

After the swing, golfers should be able to hold their position and tap their back toe, meaning the majority of the weight is on the front foot.

The pros said many golfers don't transfer their weight instinctively during the swing — unlike athletes in other sports.

Menzies said he had a particular student swinging without any weight transfer to the target. He then asked her to pick up the golf ball and just throw it into the distance.

"She looked like one of the Detroit Tigers' pitchers," Menzies said. "Right up on her toe, balanced. We instinctively do that in baseball or throwing a snowball, but, in golf, oftentimes we're not even close. ... You want all the weight and momentum to carry through."

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